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SUBJECT: Interior Minister Discusses Planned Deportation of Liberian

Refugees

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a March 18 meeting with Ambassador Bridgewater, Interior Minister Kwamena Bartels said that the GOG is collaborating closely with UNHCR, the Ghana Refugee Board, and the Government of Liberia in implementing plans to revoke the refugee status and deport 659 Liberian refugees who were arrested after demonstrating at Buduburam refugee camp since February 19. Bartels stressed that the GOG is complying fully with the law, and that UNHCR is facilitating the repatriation by organizing a UN aircraft for the effort. In contrast, UNHCR's Ghana Representative indicated subsequently that it would only consider the aircraft request if the repatriation were voluntary. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Bridgewater, accompanied by POL Chief, met March 18 with Ghanaian Interior Minister Kwamena Bartels, to discuss the recent arrest of Liberian refugees at the Buduburam Refugee Camp, and the GOG's announcement that it would terminate the refugee status of those who had been arrested, and deport them imminently. In attendance were Minister of State (MOI) Nana Obiri Boahen and Ghana Refugee Board Chairman Bawumia. Boahen and Bawumia had returned that afternoon from Buduburam, where they were accompanied by a UNHCR representative and the Liberian Ambassador to Ghana.

¶3. (SBU) Ambassador Bridgewater expressed U.S. concern that the GOG adhere to its international obligations concerning refugees, including the 1951 Convention requirements regarding non-refoulement, and urged the GOG to collaborate closely with UNHCR and the Ghana Refugee Board.

¶4. (SBU) In response, Bartels made the following points:

-- The refugees have been demonstrating since February 19 and were in breach of the Public Order Law.

-- The refugees have stated that 1) they do not want to integrate into Ghana; (2) they want resettlement in a Western country (preferably the U.S.); and (3) they want USD 1000 per person if they return to Liberia.

-- The organizers have prevented children from attending school, forced all schools to close, and prevented the distribution of food aid to the elderly and children. Refugee leaders who disagreed with this strategy were threatened and had to flee.

-- Ghana has hosted these refugees for 18 years and these demonstrations and demands are a sign of ingratitude.

-- If the refugees will not accept local integration, will not be resettled in a Western country, and will not receive USD 1000 for repatriation, then they must respect the law. Otherwise, the GOG has no choice but to prosecute and revoke their refugee status.

-- The GOG has arrested 659 refugees, and has initiated a

consultative process to invoke the Cessation Clause for Liberian Refugees.

-- The GOG will not allow this group to destabilize Buduburam and is carefully applying the law to deal with the issue.

-- The GOG has collaborated closely with UNHCR, the Ghana Refugee Board, and the Liberian government. Neither UNHCR, the GRB, or the Liberian Government had objected to the plan to revoke refugee status and deport the 659 Liberians.

-- Furthermore, UNHCR had arranged for a UN aircraft to pick up the Liberian deportees, and Liberia's Foreign Minister will travel to Accra tomorrow to consult with the GOG.

-- In an aside following the meeting, GRB Chairman Bawumia said it was unfortunate that a "few instigators" were causing trouble for the other Liberian refugees. He opined that the instigators were probably ex-combatants, and that a large amount of the frustrations among refugees was due to the fact that they have nothing to show for the 18 years they have been at Buduburam.

15. (SBU) Following the meeting with Minister Bartels, Ambassador Bridgewater spoke with the Liberian Ambassador, who confirmed the plan for a UN plane to arrive in Ghana to pick up the refugees, probably on Thursday. He noted that the Liberian Government had issued a formal apology to the GOG for the behavior of the refugees, but expressed concern that if refugees are sent back to Liberia en masse, it could cause a security problem for the GOL. He also added that Liberians at Buduburam were phoning contacts in Liberia and encouraging them to engage in similar demonstrative activities in solidarity with Buduburam residents.

16. (SBU) The Ambassador was unable to speak with the UNHCR Representative in Accra but learned March 19 that she had given the

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BBC an interview on the subject (we are trying to get that transcript). Ambassador was able to speak March 19 with UNDP Res Rep Daouda Toure who said UNHCR had received similar information that there were a few at the camp who had instigated and fueled the demonstrations. Both Toure and Ambassador said that it is important for the GOG to insure that international protocols are guaranteed for the refugees, as well as making sure that the laws of Ghana are not broken.

17. (SBU) Subsequently, Accra Refugee Coordinator (RCO) spoke with Ghana UNHCR Representative Aida Haile Mariam. Mariam said that the Government of Liberia had asked UNHCR for help in repatriating the arrested Liberians. UNHCR responded that if this was a voluntary repatriation, they would consider the request. However, if this is a deportation, they could not. In implementing voluntary repatriation, noted Mariam, UNHCR generally requires the refugee to sign that they are making the decision voluntarily. Mariam also said that UNHCR had gained access to the detention facility that afternoon, but had not yet received the names of those in the facility from the GOG.

18. (SBU) Comment: Bartels appeared calm, but determined to press forward with the deportations, and his tone conveyed considerable GOG anger over the Liberians' demonstrations and demands after 18 years in Ghana. While he and the GRB claim to be collaborating with UNHCR, it is unclear whether UNHCR is effectively communicating, both with regard to the aircraft and to the legal steps the GOG must follow with the refugees. As we are unable to assess whether appropriate legal standards are being applied by the GOG, we recommend that RMA Geneva consult further with UNHCR headquarters.
END COMMENT.

9.(U) Post will continue to monitor this situation and provide updates as we receive new details.

BRIDGEWATER